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What Lies Behind: Speculations on the Real and the Willful

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts

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WHAT LIES BEHIND: SPECULATIONS ON THE REAL AND THE WILLFUL

(Thesis format: Integrated Article)

by

Barbara Hobot

Graduate Program in Visual Art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This integrated article thesis has three distinct chapters. Chapter One is an extended artist statement within which the following research questions are extrapolated: In what ways can an art practice question both the limitations of human-centered knowledge and issues of ‘the real’? What roles do both abstraction and representation play within this kind of artistic practice? Descriptions and analyses of my artwork are provided throughout this chapter. Chapter Two is comprised of visual documentation of the artwork I made during my MFA candidacy, accompanied by brief descriptions of each piece. Chapter Three is a case study on the work of San Franciscan artist Trisha Donnelly. I playfully propose that Donnelly’s art has a life of its own, independent of the will that made it. I explain how her artwork invites anthrodecentric interpretation by illustrating its autonomous characteristics through the lenses of autopoiesis and panpsychism.

Keywords

Abstraction, Anthrodecentrism, Autopoiesis, Baudrillard, Trisha Donnelly, Faux painting, Lacan, Niklas Luhmann, Nothingness, Panpsychism, Representation, Kellie Robertson, Sentience of objects, The Real, Zizek.

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Introduction

This Masters of Fine Arts thesis dossier consists of three parts that complement my thesis exhibition, taking place at DNA Artspace, London, Ontario, from August 23 to September 27, 2014. The three parts of this dossier are: a Comprehensive Artist Statement, Practice Documentation, and a Writing Practice Component in the form of a Case Study. These three parts form the basis of the research I conducted during my MFA candidacy, the culmination of which is manifested in the artwork I have presented in my thesis exhibition.

My Comprehensive Artist Statement starts with a short creative piece of prose that envisions what it might be like to slice open dense matter such as a grassy hill or a pile of compacted snow. This imaginative exercise presents the crux of my studio-based investigations founded on a desire to get inside of materials in order to understand them more intimately. I am interested in generating a conversation about the limitations of human-centered knowledge, acknowledging through my practice my inability to ever fully know my surroundings. For example, I paint wood grain as a means to analyse the material's structure, but wood itself has properties and forces beyond my control. The artist statement elaborates on what it means, theoretically, to see what lies behind or inside. I describe my painted faux surfaces and how both representation and abstraction can contribute to a construction of reality. Here, a Baudrillardian analysis is used to unravel how the faux-wood grain patterns in my work operate.

My artist statement also describes the gesture of slicing and how that is utilized in my studio to reveal an empty interior, or simply the material upon which the painted surface lies. A deeper analysis of voids and their relationship to the real is investigated through the philosophical frameworks of Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Lacan. For Žižek and Lacan, the void is where 'the real' lies. The limitations of human knowledge are discussed by looking at anthrodecentric¹ ideologies, such as those proposed by scholar Kellie Robertson and her work on the interdependency of humans and minerals.

¹ 'Anthrodecentric' is an inversion of the word 'anthropocentric' and refers to a set of beliefs that do not privilege the human over non-human or non-sentient matter.

The second part of my dossier is my Practice Documentation, and is comprised of a number of images that represent my studio-based research. Some of the artwork featured was made early on in my candidacy while others are more recent. Rather than show a progression, I have chosen to share my most developed work that best represents my theoretical interests. Each image is accompanied by a title, list of materials, dimensions and a brief text that describes how the work was made and at times recounts my decision-making process.

Finally, my Case Study is an analysis of the work of San Franciscan artist Trisha Donnelly. I have chosen to focus on her particular art practice because of how she uses both abstraction and representation to create a body of work that is challenging to analyze. Avoiding the propensity to describe this kind of work as magical or ineffable, I playfully propose that Donnelly's art has a life of its own, independent of the will that made it. While this proclamation, at first glance, sounds preposterous, I demonstrate how the autonomy of objects was not such a strange concept at a different time and place. Using the concepts of autopoiesis and panpsychism, I explain how her artwork could be interpreted as independently willful, and how it is being interpreted as such by specific critics and the artist herself.

Both my Artist Statement and Case Study utilize an anthrodecentric ideology to discuss topics of abstraction, artistic intention, and the limitations of human knowledge. Abstraction presents something that is unnamable. When an artwork is abstract it defies complete recognition on the part of the viewer. The following dossier discusses various artists, such as Trisha Donnelly, who use abstraction as a means to relinquish their own control in search of the unexpected. These artists are also interested in keeping their personal intentions discreet in favour of interpretation outside of themselves. This dossier speculates on how artwork can be analyzed when human-centric modes of examination are interrogated. How can we understand art objects if we assume a different position, one that may knock humans out of the conversation to some degree? This challenging and at times seemingly impossible question is central to my research.

Comprehensive Artist Statement

The sliced belly of the berm

Just when the sun is setting, the temperature is dropping, and people start to look into fridges, rummage through cupboards; dusk. This is the perfect time to peer through backlit windows into the private lives of neighbours. A singing and dancing show on the TV. A brown woven throw covering a rip in the sofa. A lampshade made of buttons illuminating a solid wood end table. Is he on the phone or is he singing?

Driving down a stretch of highway, you can see a berm to your left. It quickly morphs into a grass-covered hill, quite tall now. It stretches for a while, like maybe 500 meters. It could be functioning as a sound barrier for the cheese farm on the other side. The hill is fat and green like the belly of a giant lying on its back. You imagine an enormous knife that also has a big belly. Wood handle. Hand-forged blade. You take the knife and slice the hill to reveal a cross-section. The slice of compacted clay, sand, and soil is interrupted by fishing nets, gold pans, and moth-eaten rugs.

The same slicing can be done to a mountain of dirty snow in the mall parking lot. You can use a hot wire, a taser, or a blow torch once you figure out how to unearth these tools.

My studio-based research has evolved into a curiosity about the limits of human knowledge. This has been expressed through my use of both representation and abstraction, the incorporation of voids and versos, along with an anthrodecentric philosophical framework. Each of these elements will be explored in this thesis paper using examples from my body of work as well as references to various philosophies. I hope to shed light on the motivations of my practice and some potential readings of my artworks.

In making the work for my thesis exhibition, I have been preoccupied with painted faux surfaces and how they incite a conversation about representation and its role in the construction of reality. The three-dimensionality of my work invites the viewer to peer inside or behind in order to decipher what one is seeing. In this way, the inside or verso of an object can offer meaning. This meaning, however, fluctuates and never quite rests in a definitive location.

Untitled (*Sliced Birch Ply*) (2014) is a piece of black imitation leather foam that has been painted on the back with a faux wood grain pattern. The colour and grain striations mimic birch plywood. This piece of foam was then sliced and curved to create rings that sag, reminiscent of Robert Morris' drooping industrial felt pieces. Like the material Morris used, the black faux leather of *Sliced Birch Ply* is a manufactured product. Its interior (the faux wood painting) represents another processed good -- plywood. Both outside and inside are surfaces that mimic organic materials: leather and wood respectively. Through the gesture of slicing, seen in *Sliced Birch Ply*, my intention is to invite the viewer to peer inside and look through or beyond the surface of the artwork.

What's behind the surface?

When a viewer takes a look behind the black faux leather exterior she may, at first, think that a veneer of plywood has been laminated to the faux leather. A closer inspection of the interior reveals that in fact the birch pattern has been hand-painted. Looking inside or

behind the surface can offer the viewer more information. How else can ‘looking behind’ be interpreted, particularly when the inside is a so-called misrepresentation? To help unravel this inquiry, I quote a substantial section from Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* (1996):

In his seminar on the gaze Lacan retells the classical tale of the *trompe-l’oeil* contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Zeuxis paints grapes in a way that lures birds, but Parrhasios paints a veil in a way that deceives Zeuxis, who asks to see what lies behind the veil and concedes the contest in embarrassment. . . . [T]he human is deceived in relation to *what lies behind*. And behind the picture, for Lacan, is the gaze, the object, the real, with which “the painter as creator ... sets up a dialogue”. Thus a perfect illusion is not possible, and, even if it were possible it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented; indeed, it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object [...] (141).

The work presented in my thesis exhibition is positioned in relation to the inquiry *what lies behind*. I equate the desire to look behind with the urge to understand something more fully. Metaphorically, one could wish to ‘get inside’ another’s head, for example, in order to understand his or her thought-process. A judge is beholden to viewing an event ‘from all angles’ in order to get a complete account of what occurred. It would seem that surface is just the beginning of understanding.

The folding of form, as seen in *Untitled (Folded)* (2013) necessarily creates an interior void. The viewer’s eye passes through the hand-cut holes of the faux-wood-painted mylar, revealing the verso which has been painted robin’s egg blue. The gesture of folding creates a central void, while the gesture of cutting allows one to peer into this void. Philosophically speaking, this gap holds the potential for something remarkable.

For Slavoj Žižek, the Real exists in a gap such as this “empty place” just described (*Interrogating the Real* 340). For him, reality emerges out of a vacuum: “Reality-in-itself is Nothingness, the Void, and out of this Void, partial, not yet fully constituted constellations of reality appear” (*Less Than Nothing* 926). This mode of thought surfaces

again with Lacan's rumination on nothingness. He playfully states that there is no *nothing*: "Nothing, perhaps? No -- perhaps nothing, but not nothing" (59). From these philosophies engaged with questions of abstraction, we might speculate that reality emerges from nothingness, and that nothingness is not empty at all, but rather full of potential. This concept reaches back to ancient Greece with philosopher Parmenides of Elea who suggested "that there is only Nothing, that all processes take place 'from Nothing through Nothing to Nothing' " (39). From this, could we surmise that voids are not empty at all, but rather places where worldly concerns and even physical matter find a place of gestation? Gaps, voids, and versos hold the potential to convey meaning, concepts of reality, nothing and yet everything. This potential provides fertile ground for my artistic explorations.

Within the context of my thesis research, the search for 'the real' is about knowledge. From knowledge I would like to draw a link to the concept of control. My interest in keeping knowledge or meaning in flux is a mechanism for surrendering control, particularly in relation to my own agency as a 'maker' of my work. I will return to this notion under the section "Abstraction as a means to surrender control".

Simulation and closeness

While the search for 'the real' is a philosophical framework for my practice, so too are ideas and gestures regarding the notion of simulation. Much of the work in my thesis exhibition relies on my observation of wood veneer samples: I create thin painted surfaces by mimicking thin sheets of wood which are ordinarily used to simulate the appearance of solid wood. The action of creating veneers with reference to veneers not only twice removes the viewer from the 'original', but also brings into focus one's relationship to wood or other so-called natural materials. Is our orientation toward veneer similar to how we feel about solid wood? Do we know wood through its representations? Do the striations found in MACtac wood, for example, appear to be truer to the model than real wood itself? A Baudrillardian analysis would support these inquiries: "It is

rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double . . .” (Baudrillard). My thesis work posits that the substitution of painted wood grain for wood itself calls attention to an inability to fully encounter or even comprehend the real. We recognize wood through its substitutions, leading me to posit that fully *knowing* any object is beyond my recognition. My work both records my failed search for the real, and attempts to ask the viewer to consider his or her own relationship to that search.

Many of the works in my thesis exhibition either depict or are abstract derivatives of wood grain. For example, in *White Cedar Grain #2* (2014), the wood grain pattern on the surface of the paper was drawn by observing a sample of cedar veneer. The action of reproducing the appearance of a material by hand caused me to slow down long enough to become more acquainted with the subtle variations of the wood’s surface. The act of re-presenting brought me closer (in proximity) to the material. The closeness in proximity allows for the observation and subsequent translation of a three dimensional object into a two dimensional depiction. The resulting faux finish asserts itself as a flat surface, without an inside. The lack of a suggestion of an ‘interior’ substance removes the viewer from the thing it is -- no observation of the ‘stuff’ it is made of can occur, thus an analysis of what it *is* is not readily accessible. A distancing occurs between the viewer and the artwork.

Here I want to suggest that the act of creating a distance, upon which my work depends, would not happen as immediately were I to use readymade wood simulations, such as laminate flooring or faux wood paneling. These mass-produced objects have already undergone a process of translation and depiction and they are recognizable as such. So their very substance is their industrial production; their constitution can be named.

The lack of interior I describe above is undermined when I slice into a faux-painted surface. This action reveals the substance of the drawing. In the case of *Sliced Birch Ply*, the substance is faux-leather foam. Slicing faux-wood grain to reveal an industrially produced synthetic material further complicates the reading of the work. The viewer

thinks she sees ‘real’ wood, realizes it is a simulation, and is subsequently confronted by an inorganic material that holds an image of the organic on its surface.

Abstraction as a means to surrender control

Theories of the real are inter-related with abstraction. Re-presentations of imagery obliterate or abstract the idea of *an original*. In his essay “Simulacra and Simulations”, Jean Baudrillard writes that “illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible”, and that “the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none.” With this in mind, a circular, looping logic begins to reveal itself: an illusionistic wood grain painting is synonymous with real wood grain, while true wood grain is one and the same as its representations. The real and its simulations are interchangeable, making the placement of the real or true impossible.

Similarly, abstraction presents something that is unplaceable. When an artwork is abstract it confuses associative recognition on the part of the viewer. Meaning shifts and spins and knowledge is in constant flux (Howlett). While the painted surfaces of some of my artworks are mimetic, I utilize abstract components, such as geometric slicing and repetitious mark-making, to confuse and prolong the process of reading these works.

Of course, the meaning of the word ‘abstraction’ is itself in flux. Contemporary artists quote abstract gestures from preceding decades: What were once a slew of images and techniques with no referent can now be called a high-tech Boogie Woogie, an ironic drip, or a neo-sincere exploration of surface. The abstraction that I wish to keep in one’s mind for the purpose of this essay is one that is *not* self-referential, but hovers in a *no language zone*. Admittedly, this is potentially an impossible art form. However, I hold on to the possibility that there could still exist an abstraction that does not converse with the abstraction that came before it. This no language zone is something for which to strive in the studio -- a speculative place.

Exemplary of this search for abstraction without quotation is an article in *Frieze Magazine* from 2012. It describes abstraction in relation to the metaphysical through a number of artist interviews. Painter Charline von Heyl speaks of her processes in abstraction as a removed experience, describing her work as ‘self-reliant’ and as having ‘created itself.’ Artist Tomma Abts playfully asserts that ‘higher beings are involved’ in her artistic process. Painter Bernd Ribbeck suggests that artwork has the capacity to move across time and space: “For me, the idea that my paintings could originate from another world or time gives me the freedom to move artistically” (Bedford).

Here we see a number of artists grabbing hold of abstraction for its ability to open portals to unknown dimensions. Venturing into the unknown is fruitful ground for the creation of something not necessarily tied to the convention of human intentionality. Embracing chance, and even non-human influences, can open new territory not burdened by such historical constructions as that of the autonomous artist. What this territory looks like is precisely my studio-based research question.

Earlier I wrote of “keeping knowledge or meaning in flux” as a way to surrender control, “particularly in relation to my own agency as a ‘maker’ of my work.” In keeping with the beliefs of the artists quoted above, I too am interested in an art practice that makes space for creative possibilities not tied to my own ambition. While there is no way around the fact that my hands physically make artwork, I am not making for the sole purpose of asserting my own artistic autonomy or subjectivity.

A mind of its own

The work in my thesis exhibition is concerned with “what lies behind”, with the real in relation to both absence and simulation, and it is also philosophically rooted within object oriented philosophy. In my studio, my human intentions are subjected to skepticism, to the acknowledgement that the desires of the materials I work with and the 'images' produced are not fully within my control, that I am only ever a 'co-creator' of the work.

While this sounds physically impossible, I am not alone when I say art can have a ‘mind’ of its own. Recently, Isabelle Graw wrote about the capacity for painting² to have a mind of its own. She asserts “that painting is a sort of discourse producer that arrives at its own insights”, because it is imbued with the artist’s subjectivity (54). In other words, an artwork comes alive when it is indexical of the maker’s affect. Furthermore, an artwork is more valuable (not just monetarily), Graw proposes, when it beholds traces of the maker.

My interest in the sentience of artwork is in direct opposition to Graw’s argument. My theoretical stance is that artwork can become autonomous the *less* it is an index of my subjectivity. Graw’s one-to-one relationship between artist and artwork is what I am interested in countering with my work, as I believe this mode of thought reverts the role of the artist back to ideals of ‘artist as genius’, ie., the artwork is valuable only because it is attached to an accomplished autonomous artist.

My philosophical and political position as an artist has developed into an anthrodecentric ideology, where the human is not a solitary producer of culture but an organism that works in tandem with the non-sentient. This concept has its roots in Medieval natural studies where morals could be learned from the observation of minerals.³ According to scholar Kellie Robertson, rocks had a:

recognizable potential energy . . . that would lead a medieval reader to ask: what kind of cleric or citizen gets precipitated out of these rocks? What kind of rock from these clerics and monastics? While the natural world was seen as a signifier for hidden spiritual truths, this allegorized world is one of mutual, rather than unidirectional, influence . . . (94).

² Much of the artwork I reference in this paper is based within a painting practice. While I use acrylic paint, my work’s relationship to painting is much closer to the *trompe l’oeil* of set and prop design than it is to fine art painting. However, I rely heavily on the *flatness* of the painted surface as a way to suggest a barrier or veil. The discussion of flatness has a historical precedent within the theoretical discourse of Modernist painting.

³ The interconnectivity between humans, animals, and non-sentient materials is an integral part of the culture and worldview of First Nations people. This expansive knowledge base is not one that can be explored in this essay, but important to note for its ties to the anthrodecentric philosophy mentioned.

It is this mutual dependency and interconnection between the animate and inanimate that allows me to work from a productive, albeit at times seemingly fraught, position. As philosopher Thomas Nagel suggests, we can never comprehend a world outside of our human observational faculties, and it is this limitation that propels me in the studio. Imagining myself as a maker with compromised control makes room for unexpected results and a less constrained methodology. Speculating about the limits of human knowledge carves a bit of room for the unpredictable to occur. While I do not hesitate to claim responsibility for the art objects in my studio, questioning my role as both an artist and a part of a larger context is integral to my creative project.

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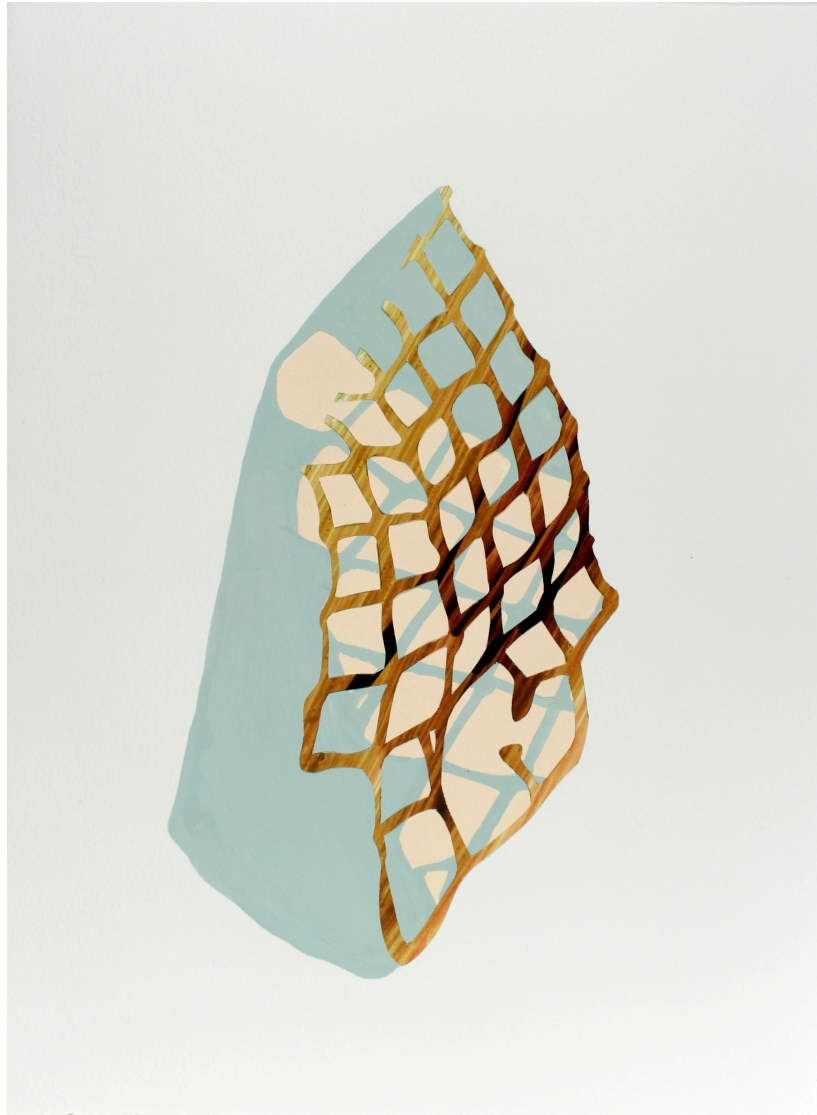
London: Continuum, 2005. Print.

Practice Documentation



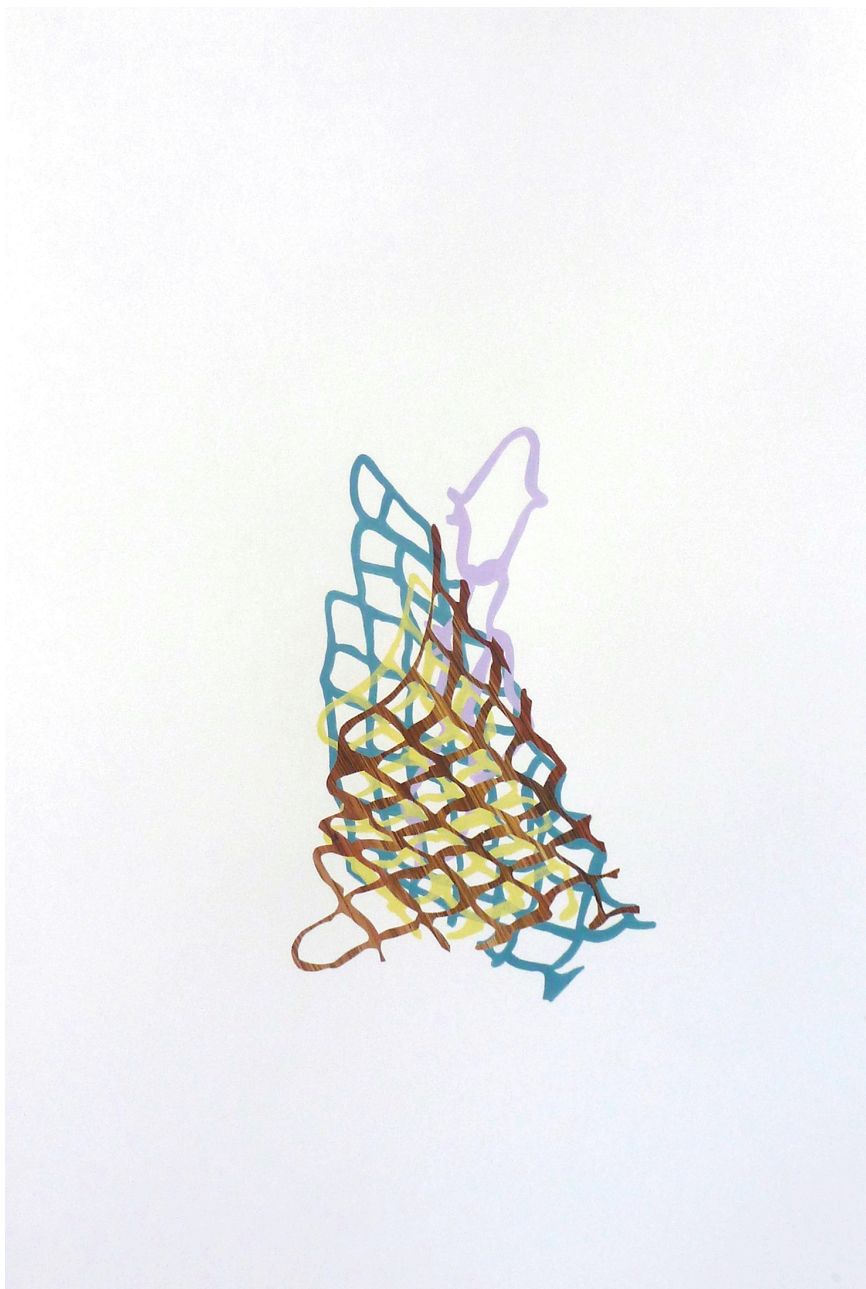
Teak # 2, 2013, acrylic on paper, 11" x 15"

This piece is from a series of wedge-shaped drawings that mimic wood grain. These studies are painted from observation and are an attempt to replicate real wood veneer. The wedge is a simple tool that can transfer formidable amounts of mechanical energy in order to pry materials apart or hold them together.



Untitled (*Curtain #1*), 2013, casein, acrylic, collage on paper, 11" x 15"

This is the first of a series of small drawings that utilize hand-cut paper netting. The cutout is moved around the page and traced to create an abstract pattern reminiscent of a cape or veil. This pattern is painted in with contrasting colours and the paper net is then collaged on top.



Untitled (*Curtain #6*), 2014, acrylic, collage on paper, 15" x 23"



Untitled (*Curtain #3*), 2014, acrylic, collage on paper, 10" x 14"



Untitled (*Net #2*), 2014, acrylic on hand-cut paper, 18" x 24"

A very loose acrylic wash has been applied to a thin sheet of paper. The colour and striations mimic a generic wood grain pattern. The level of verisimilitude is similar to theatrical set design. Using a net that I made out of nylon string, I trace the pattern of the netting as it rests on the paper. This tracing is then cut out using a utility knife. The suggested undulations of the drawing give this piece the sense of a third dimension.



Untitled (*Folded*), 2013, casein on hand-cut frosted mylar, 6" x 12" x 1"

Here, faux-painted wood grain is again paired with a cutout net pattern. The folding of the frosted mylar creates a surface, an empty interior, and a revealed verso. My intention with this piece is to incite the viewer to peer inside in order to become more familiar with the material properties of the work.



Untitled (*Sliced Birch Ply*), 2014, acrylic on faux leather foam, H 48" x W 30" x D 20"

This piece has been hand-painted to look like birch plywood. At first glance, the viewer assumes that plywood has been bent into a cylindrical shape. Upon closer inspection, it is apparent that the 'wood' is in fact faux-painted. Both interior and exterior are fabricated to appear as something other than what it is.



Untitled (*Sliced Birch Ply*), 2014 (detail)



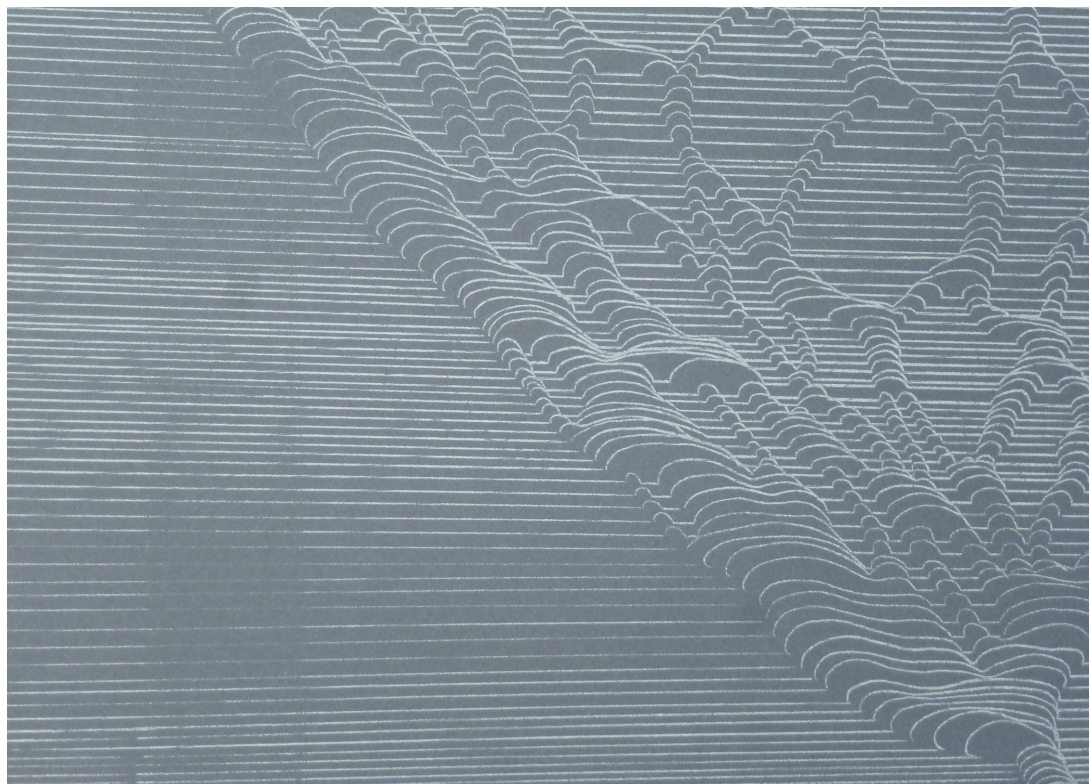
Wood on Wood, 2014, hand-cut acrylic on paper, mahogany veneer, 8" x 8"

This piece was made in the same way as the earlier collage work: a three-dimensional net was placed and traced onto a piece of paper that had been painted with a wood grain pattern. The contours of that tracing were cut out with a utility blade. This paper net was then collaged onto a thin slice of real mahogany veneer. The striations of the faux-painted surface mimic the patterns of the real wood, blurring the distinction between the two materials.



White Net #3, 2014, white transfer on paper, 19.5" x 25.5"

This drawing was made by tracing a physical net onto a piece of grey paper using white transfer paper. The horizontal lines were created using a ruler and a stylus, resulting in a scan-like series of marks. The transfer paper was seamed together with tape, resulting in a fainter transfer in some areas. These gaps of information obscure the image, leaving the viewer to piece together segments in order to understand the drawing as a whole.



White Net #3, 2014, white transfer on paper (detail)



Untitled (*Curtain Drawing*), 2014, digital print (edition of 3), 19.5" x 26"

This is a digital photograph of two window coverings that have sunlight cast through them. The stripes and undulating forms are reminiscent of the scan-like lines seen in drawings such as *White Net #3*.

Writing Practice Component - Case Study

But I don't think I make my work anyway ... it happens inside.

- Trisha Donnelly (Obrist 219)

A disembodied bat's ear in pencil. An organ concert you just missed. Sphinx twins with a spotlight gaze that will stop you in your tracks. This is the work of San Franciscan artist Trisha Donnelly. Her oeuvre consists of sculpture, video, drawing, photography and sound. Sometimes her work is faint or barely present -- her pencil drawings like a fog on the brink of the invisible. Other times her work exists only for a moment for a limited audience, here one day and gone the next. Her work can seem encoded with an impenetrable shield against potential reading. And as she suggests in the opening quote, her artworks are perhaps without author, created in a place that is unnamable.

Donnelly is often evasive when asked about the motivations of her work. Many of her artworks are untitled, and most of her exhibitions are intentionally bereft of didactic panels or press releases. With this key information missing, viewers have no textual cues for the artist's intentions. In a 2002 exhibition of twelve pencil crayon drawings, the title information instructed visitors to see the front desk for more details. The gallery attendant would then play for the visitor a series of electronic beats in lieu of a title. As Anna Lovatt puts it in a recent review, "this substitution of a sound for a linguistic sign could be seen as another manifestation of Donnelly's reluctance to verbalise the experience of her work" (Lovatt). If the language surrounding the artist's work lies beyond reach, in between states of liquid and vapour, how do we name it? Explain it? Understand it? If Donnelly does not speak for her art, who or what does?

The current intellectual discourse surrounding Trisha Donnelly's practice relies, in part, on critics who produce cushions of language around the seemingly ineffable. Most resort to language which further obscures our interpretation. Critic Lauren O'Neill-Butler, for

example, describes the dynamism of Donnelly's art as, "...often left in suspension, with a plethora of thoughts and ideas (hers and ours) fading in and out of focus." There is an 'unpindownable' quality to her art practice that I will explore in this text. An attempt to describe the nature of one drawing will not hold true for another. Or the way the artist speaks about her artistic motivations may further confuse the reading of a work. This constant shifting of meaning is likely Donnelly's intention, and in this way, the work is purportedly free to come into being without a predetermined identity. When work is positioned as such - liberated from the conventions of didactic interpretation - the artist, viewer, and artwork can engage in a three-way conversation. These open lines of bidirectional discourse are where meaning-making can emerge; meaning that is no longer directed by a human-centered perspective alone. It is here that knowledge production can be multilateral, accessible, and open.

In the text that follows, I playfully propose that Trisha Donnelly's art has a life of its own, independent of the will that made it. I will explain how her artwork is free from the restraints of human-centered didacticism by illustrating its autonomous characteristics through the lenses of autopoiesis and panpsychism.

An eternal staring contest

Flipping through the *dOCUMENTA (13)* guidebook, one can find the biographical information of each participating artist, along with didactic text about the artwork in the exhibition. The catalogue's index lists Trisha Donnelly's entry as page 422. But no. That can't be right.

There's no biography for Donnelly on page 422. And where is the didactic information about the work she exhibited?

There isn't any.

Further dissection of the catalogue reveals that Donnelly is the only artist who is represented by two colour images and absolutely no biography or curatorial text. While all other participating artists are represented by a page of text accompanied by a photo-reproduction, Donnelly is the only one who substituted her text for an additional image. One image on page 422 faces another image on page 423. Here, Donnelly's work is interpreted not with language but with more of Donnelly's work -- it is in this way autopoietic.

Autopoietic vs Apotropaic

Sociologist, Niklas Luhmann (1927 - 1998) is a prominent thinker in systems theory. In his 1995 text *Art as a Social System*, he discusses autopoiesis as a self-generating action where one part of a system refers to itself to create the next part. In art, we can think of this as a process-based practice, where one creative gesture leads to the next until a whole body of work has, in a sense, grown of itself. This is not to be confused with repetition, where a system or artwork simply goes on autopilot to produce clones. Rather, autopoiesis insists that something new must follow what came before (49-50):

One cannot derive the existence of worms, birds, and human beings from the singular invention of the autopoiesis of life. [...]. Nor can one infer from the autopoiesis of art which works will be created. The concept's lack of explanatory power stands in disproportional relation to its revolutionizing effect (51).

Interesting to note Luhmann's take on meaning -- less explanation paves the way for novelty. Furthermore, explanation can undermine the emancipation of the viewer. Take, for instance, Jacques Rancière's assertion that explication assumes an inability to understand on one's own. In the case at hand, if an artist explains her work to the viewer it presupposes the lack of intelligence of the viewer (6). We can see Donnelly's elusive stance in harmony with Luhmann's systems theory of art. As she stands back from the process of interpretation, she allows her work breathing room for the creation of

something new: that novel *thing* being a different kind of meaning-making, one which requires the participation of the artist, viewer, and artwork. Luhmann further stipulates that artwork communicates en masse; that one artwork alone cannot generate meaning. He states, “A work of art without other works is as impossible as an isolated communication without further communications” (53). This would seem to fit well with Donnelly’s choice to include two works, not one, in the *Documenta* catalogue, offering the viewer a dialogue between work as a way of generating context without language.

Autopoiesis is one way to consider Donnelly’s pictorial stand-off in the *Documenta* catalogue -- a closed loop of self-generated meaning. On the other hand (and perhaps during a different time and place) we could consider this lack of didactic information as an apotropaic gesture. Perhaps Donnelly’s art faces itself to ward off evil spirits, with the evil spirits in the case being art criticism. Jan Verwoert explains this phenomena in his explanation of sympathetic magic: “[...] if you seek to protect yourself against a particular devil, then you need to acquire a juju (amulet) in which the spirit of that very devil inheres -- so that the demon itself defends you against itself [...]” (84).

Could it be that Donnelly’s art wards off the ‘demons’ of critique and interpretation with more of itself?⁴ A single image is vulnerable to verbal contextualization, where two images create a non-verbal conversation. The two images in the *Documenta* catalogue face off in an eternal staring contest, a circle of self-evaluation and scrutiny. The absence of text or written interpretation allows for a silent draw between images; an event, perhaps an exorcism.

We must take a leap of faith and believe Donnelly when she says, “I don’t think I make my work anyway”. Perhaps that statement is not so hard to believe. Surely she is not the only artist who feels that *something else* takes over at a certain point in creative

⁴ I use the word ‘demons’ here with the assumption that Donnelly aims to avoid the contextualization of her work through conventional language. In this way, I dramatically characterize textual critique and interpretation as ‘evil’ in order to analyze the *Documenta* catalogue using Verwoert’s explanation of sympathetic magic.

production. But what if we were to take her statement literally? While her name is stuck to the wall on which the artwork hangs (or levitates?), authorship could be assigned to a different, non-artist, phenomenon. In fact, she has described the act of making drawings “as being like a mechanical task assigned to her” (Stout).

This text functions under the paradoxical assumption that Trisha Donnelly does not make her work. This assumption will clear a path toward new interpretations of Donnelly’s elusive oeuvre. Rather than getting stuck in the quicksand of explicating the artist’s fugitive behaviour, we will move freely through this body of work toward potential reading *outside* of the artist’s intentions. Moving past intentionality may offer not only a more expansive and open means of interpretation, but also a different way to approach art-making and art criticism.

Art that moves of its own accord

In the mythology surrounding Donnelly’s practice, one reads about the autokinetic quality of her works. Drawings have been described as having the capacity to move through walls. In a 2005 essay, art historian Julian Myers recounts his visit to an exhibition of Donnelly’s work at Casey Kaplan gallery in New York. He describes a drawing:

A fourth, untitled work appears (*Untitled, 1_2*, 2004), a meticulously drawn thing that looks to be a rotting saddle, or crumpled metal wreckage. ‘How is it attached?’ I ask, fishing for clues. It’s pinned, I am informed, for if it were framed the drawing would not be able to go through the wall. (92)

Here, Myers describes an untitled diptych pencil drawing. Unlike the standard side-by-side installation of a diptych, this one is hung on either side of a wall, with the wall sandwiched in between. One drawing acts as a positive image: a fully rendered form. The other is a wispy outline of the positive, as if the rotting saddle to which Myers refers was

placed on a sheet of paper and traced with a series of Agnes Martin-like ticks. This ‘negative’ drawing is reminiscent of a chalk outline from a crime scene, the wall in between holding the invisible act that leads from positive to negative. We get the sense that an event took place when we weren’t looking. The staring contest is over and the work has turned its back on itself.

And if these drawings were framed, this movement from one side of the wall to the other could not be possible. Myers discovered this mysterious piece of information when he visited the gallery in person. In a recent email exchange, he tells me that he was speaking to a gallery assistant, “who had been either very clearly instructed by Trisha to say this, or who was carefully repeating what Trisha had said about it” (Myers). Here we have an example of the artist willfully speaking about the kinetic potential of her work. Her artistic will is instrumental in the viewers’ interpretation. And yet, the artist uses her will to assert the art’s own will -- to move through a wall by itself. So while Donnelly is not a passive bystander to how the artwork is interpreted, her agency is used to allow for a seemingly unexpected or uncontrolled result.

Some artworks give a sense of sentience even without Donnelly’s prompting. Peter Eleey writes of the energy exuded by the artist’s work:

Indeed, all things Donnelly effuse a strange magic, often deploying a force field in the space or time between themselves and something else. Even a single drawing, like the totemic monolith that is *Bend Sinister*, exudes this energy [...] (208).

The term ‘magic’ creeps into descriptions of the artist’s work, often used to convey a sense of energy that the earth-bound may not be completely familiar with. What is this force that Eleey writes about and how can we understand it on a theoretical level? Is there a more carefully considered way to describe Donnelly’s work rather than ‘magical’ and ‘mystical’ -- words that have been through a recent process of dilution within Western contemporary art criticism? These catch-all words can quickly close off discussion as they are often used to brush off ‘something strange that we can’t explain’. I

think we must travel back to a time when minerals had souls and objects could procreate in order to consider Donnelly's practice as something more specific than *magical*.

The concept of willful objects is investigated in the 2012 anthology *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. In it, a number of essays tackle the idea of sentient, powerful objects. One such essay by Kellie Robertson titled "Exemplary Rocks" discusses the ancient Greek and early medieval belief that minerals had the potential to affect their surroundings. These beliefs were not considered mystical, but rather a conventional way to understand the natural world. Robertson explains, "what appears as supernatural to a modern reader was characteristic of an Aristotelian physical world [...] (96). Furthermore:

Unlike later medieval and modern theories of cognition, the Aristotelian version did not assume the utter passivity of the object. These cognitive assumptions followed from an Aristotelian physical world where the elements (and those objects composed of them) were endowed with an inherent nature that directed the object's movements (98).

In one time and place, Donnelly's pictures seem to move through a wall by some force of unexplainable magic. In another time and place, such as in Aristotle's world, this artwork perhaps would be understood as possessing actual motion. We can move away from the shifty soup of ineffable mysticism by rejecting contemporary adherence to empirical knowledge while embracing an ancient Greek model of panpsychism, expanded upon below.

Perhaps each art practice deserves its own unique set of interpretive rules, ones that move backward and forward within historical theories of knowledge. For Donnelly, I think it is necessary to visit post-mythological Ancient Greece in order to understand how her work is able to have a life outside of her intentions.

Panpsychism

Panpsychism is the theory that all things possess consciousness. Goats, sand, toddlers, and electrons all have minds. This belief has its roots in ancient Greece and continued into the Italian Renaissance up to 19th century British, French, and American philosophy of consciousness. Elements of this belief can be found in contemporary theories such as object-oriented ontology with the likes of Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and many others. For Harman:

... sentience is happening all the time between all sorts of objects, and - who knows? - maybe even stalks of wheat and bricks ‘encounter’ each other in some fashion in some sort of wheat-and-brick assemblage mediated by a sensuous vicar, which could be a person, or an ant, or a moonbeam (Joy 167).

There is a notable relation between Harman’s theory and that of Luhmann’s autopoiesis: For Harman, when objects encounter one another through a ‘sensuous vicar’, it leads to the creation of new objects (166-7). This is a system of procreation outside of human interaction, as is autopoiesis. Similar examples of non-human procreation can be found in Medieval Germany through the writing of Saint Albertus Magnus. Minerals were assigned sexes, and metals were said to be born from rocks after a gestation period. Analogies to all manners of reproduction were used to understand the creation of non-organic forms (Allen 130-40).

Panpsychism has been positioned against another theory of the mind, that of emergentism (Seager). Where emergentism asserts that consciousness developed spontaneously through an evolutionary turn, panpsychism cannot pinpoint the place of this occurrence on the evolutionary timeline, concluding that consciousness must be within everything, all the time. Because emergentism cannot provide a clear answer to how consciousness emerges “from entirely non-mentalistic physical features” (Seager 4.1), panpsychism offers a viable alternative theory to understanding the presence of mindfulness.

If we allow that we are surrounded by objects which are all on a spectrum of mindfulness, then perhaps we could understand artwork to, if not think for itself, then to have some level of autonomy. Rather than focus on the intention Trisha Donnelly has behind her work, we can consider it to have the potential to develop its own sense of self and meaning. Autopoietic processes, apotropaic capacities, and panpsychic energies are perhaps a good starting point for considering this body of work -- work that slips out of reach when one attempts to tie it up with words.

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Curriculum Vitae

Barbara Hobot

EDUCATION: M.F.A., Western University, London, Ontario, 2014
B.A., Fine Arts, University of Waterloo, Ontario, 2005

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS:

2014	Academic Achievement Scholarship, PSAC 610, Western University
2013	SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Master's Scholarship, Western University
2013	Ontario Graduate Scholarship (declined), Western University
2012-14	Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University
2012	Dean's Entrance Scholarship, Western University
2011	School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Summer Residency Scholarship
2011	Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2010	Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2010	National and International Residency Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2010	Emerging Artist Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2008	Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2005	Fine Arts Academic Excellence Award, University of Waterloo
2005	"Grad to Grad" Fine Art Award, University of Waterloo
2004	Lynn Holmes Memorial Art Award, University of Waterloo
2003	Kerr/Ostrander Leadership Scholarship, University of Waterloo
2002	Dr. Adolf Piotrowski Memorial Art Scholarship, Toronto Polish Alliance
2002	Helen L. Cross Memorial Fine Arts Scholarship, University of Waterloo
2001	Entrance Scholarship, University of Waterloo

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

2014	<i>The Sliced Belly of the Berm</i> , DNA Artspace, London, Ontario
2010	<i>He That Makes Himself a Sheep</i> , Peak Gallery, Toronto, Ontario (guest artist)
2009	<i>Stampede</i> , Cambridge Galleries, Preston, Cambridge (curated by Ivan Jurakic)
2007	<i>Pelted</i> , Rotunda Gallery, Kitchener, Ontario
2006	<i>New Work</i> , Artery Gallery, Kitchener, Ontario

SELECTED GROUP AND 2-PERSON EXHIBITIONS:

- 2014 *Back to the Future*, Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
- 2014 *Untitled* (the possibilities of voids and the sentience of things), Elora Centre for the Arts, Ontario (curated by Tarin Hughes)
- 2014 *The Thing About Objects*, High Park Club, Toronto, Ontario
- 2013 *Split Film Filament*, Artlab, London, Ontario
- Fresh Paint/New Construction*, Art Mûr, Montreal, Quebec
- Exhibit 28*, GalleryWest, Toronto, Ontario (curated by Nathalie Quagliotto)
- 2012 *Jubilee*, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Ontario (curated by Patrick Macaulay)
- 2011 *Goody 3 Shoes*, Chiellerie Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Goody 3 Shoes*, Galerie Kurt im Hirsch, Berlin, Germany
- survive.resist*, CAFKA.11, Biennial exhibition, Kitchener, Ontario
- 2010 *Odd Angles*, Peak Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
- Alea Iacta Est*, Weglowa Military Warehouse, Bialystok, Poland
- The Anglers: tackling lamella, weaponry and Floridian leisure*, 72 St. Leger Street, Kitchener, Ontario
- Faith*, Ross Creek Centre for the Arts, Canning, Nova Scotia
- Dear Haven*, RENDER, Waterloo, Ontario (curated by Tarin Hughes)
- 2009 *Wall Project*, Peak Gallery, Toronto, Ontario (curated by Zack Pospieszynski)
- Installation Showdown*, spOtlight Festival (sponsored by Ontario Arts Council), Cambridge, Ontario
- 2008 *Blue Blood*, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Ontario (curated by Dave Bidini and Andrew Hunter)
- Fibreworks 08*, Cambridge Galleries, Cambridge, Ontario (juried)
- ...with all the amenities ...*, School of Architecture, Cambridge / Durham Art Gallery, Ontario (curated by Andrew Hunter)
- New Work* (Patrick Cull, Jenal Dolson, Lauren Hall, Barbara Hobot, Leah James), Lang Building, Kitchener, Ontario
- 2007 *Zoo Room*, Gallery 96, Stratford, Ontario

PUBLICATIONS:

- 2014 "Age of Prevention", *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*. 10.2, (2014): 213-17. Print.
- 2012 Exhibition review, "60 Painters: A Class Act", *Canadian Art Online*, June 28 2012. Web.
- 2012 Exhibition Brochure, *We All Fall Down*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 2012. Print and Web.

- 2009 Exhibition Brochure, *Break It Down*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2009. Web.

COMMISSIONED WORK:

- 2009 *Wireworm Uprising*, commissioned by Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, PEI
Site-specific installations (with Patrick Cull, Tarin Hughes, Lisa Hunter), Waterloo Wellington Scenario Thinking, The Elora Mill Inn, Elora, Ontario
Site-specific installations (with Patrick Cull, Tarin Hughes, Lisa Hunter, Andrew Hunter), Waterloo Wellington Scenario Thinking, Centre for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo, Ontario
- 2007 *Fetish*, University of Waterloo, site-specific sculpture commissioned by RENDER, Waterloo, Ontario

RESIDENCIES:

- 2011 Art Institute of Chicago's Ox-Bow residency, Saugatuck, Michigan (July)
 2010 Art Factory, Bialystok, Poland (July and August)
 2010 Ross Creek Centre for the Arts, Canning, Nova Scotia, joint residency with Patrick Cull (April)

TALKS, JURIES:

- 2012 Jury member, Annual Juried Exhibition, The Button Factory, Waterloo, Ontario
 2011 Artist's talk, Ox-Bow Summer Residency, Saugatuck, Michigan
 2010 Guest critic, 2nd year sculpture, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario
 2010 Artists' talk, Art Factory, Bialystok, Poland
 2010 Artists' talk (with Patrick Cull), Waterloo Collegiate Institute, ArtsSmarts, Waterloo, Ontario
 2009 Artists' talk (with Patrick Cull), Shad Valley enrichment program, University of Waterloo, Ontario
 2009 Artist's talk, *Stampede*, Cambridge Galleries, Preston, Ontario
 2009 Panel discussion, "On jurying an exhibition", University of Waterloo, Ontario
 2009 Jury member, Fine Arts undergraduate exhibition, University of Waterloo, Ontario
 2009 Visiting artist, Fine Arts undergraduate critique, University of Waterloo, Ontario
 2006 Artist's talk, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, Ontario